



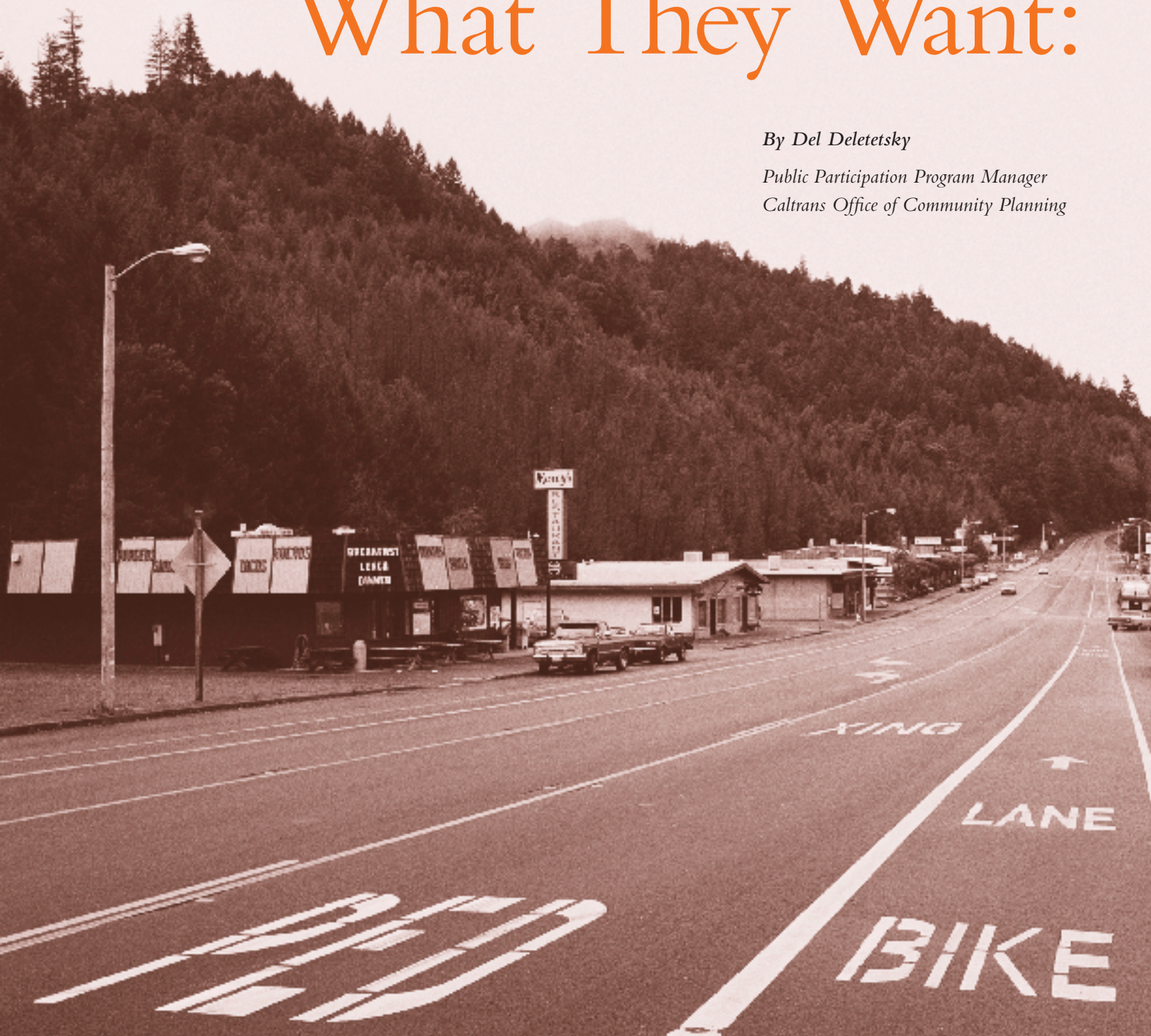
THE CONTEXT SENSITIVE APPROACH MAKES IT POSSIBLE FOR
CALTRANS TO MAINTAIN ITS RESPONSIBILITIES FOR SAFE,
INTERREGIONAL MOBILITY WHILE BEING RESPONSIVE
TO NATURAL, CULTURAL AND BUILT ENVIRONMENTS

Giving Communities What They Want:

By Del Deletetsky

Public Participation Program Manager

Caltrans Office of Community Planning





Willow Creek has benefited from “context sensitive solutions” on Highway 299 — with the addition of bicycle and turn lanes (photos on page 12). Other CSS improvements (photos on pages 13-15) give an overview of Caltrans’ solutions for local communities across the state.

Context Sensitive Solutions

Two years ago, the California Department of Transportation was planning a standard pavement overlay project on the main street of Willow Creek, a small community astride Highway 299 about 35 miles from the coast.

Although the project was relatively small by Caltrans’ standards, it was a very big deal by Willow Creek’s reckoning. In effect, the town’s main street was about to be widened into what some considered a speed zone. When townspeople got wind of the plan, they balked and asked for another design that better fit their needs.

Rather than a four-lane passing zone through the Humboldt County community, citizens asked for — and got — a two-lane main street complete with bicycle lanes, attractive parking areas and a turn lane.

Instead of transportation business as usual, Caltrans worked with the town to produce a “context sensitive solution” (CSS). That’s when things changed. In fact, the abrupt turnaround in plans was the first step in what city officials now consider a downtown renewal.

The context sensitive approach “makes it possible for Caltrans to maintain its responsibilities for safe, interregional mobility while being responsive to natural, cultural and built environments,” wrote Marsha Mason, Senior Landscape Architect, Livable Communities, in the winter 2002 issue of the *California Department of Transportation Journal*.

Since then — after completion of numerous other context sensitive projects across the state — the world is taking notice.

In September, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) honored Caltrans with its 2004 Best Practices in Smart Growth and Transportation Award during its annual conference in Philadelphia. District 5 Director Gregg Albright accepted the award on behalf of the entire Department.



This competition was cosponsored by AASHTO’s Center for Environmental Excellence along with the Federal Highway Administration. Its expert panel reviewed 36 applications from 21 states around the country before awarding finalists in three categories.

The Department won the prestigious prize in the “Institutionalization or Organizational Change” category for its entry, “Context Sensitive Solutions: Changing the Culture.”

The AASHTO judges saluted Caltrans for “connecting the dots” — of collaborating with stakeholders, balancing transportation needs and community values, and promoting seamless, interconnected multimodal systems. They saw the Department’s initiative as integrating “smart growth” in planning and delivering transportation projects.

CAITRANS WINS AWARD FOR ATTRACTIVE GATEWAYS AND STREETSCAPES, PEDESTRIAN AND BICYCLE FEATURES, AND TAMED TRAFFIC ON MAIN STREET

History

The Department's transformation to a more responsive and community-friendly policy has its roots in the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991, which provided states with design flexibility for roadways outside the National Highway System.

Soon afterward, the National Highway System Act of 1995 allowed Caltrans to consider environmental, scenic, aesthetic, historic, community and preservation aspects when building or upgrading non-interstate highways. Two years later, the Federal Highway Administration published "Flexibility in Highway Design," which allowed for new designs, particularly for highways running through communities.

These advances represented a growing public consensus. It was clear that communities wanted something different: attractive gateways and streetscapes, and pedestrian features, as well as safer and slower traffic in downtown areas.

Changing the Culture

Context sensitive solutions serve as the linchpin to integrating smart growth principles. However, just as importantly, it is vital for transportation planners and policy makers to encourage public participation and to give careful consideration to their opinions in decision-making.

As citizens become more aware, communities want local transportation corridors to reflect their unique identities. That leads to partnerships with regions and localities.

With this backdrop arrayed, Caltrans initiated the Director's Policy on Context Sensitive Solutions in 2001. This and subsequent iterations have moved Caltrans along new avenues, institutionalizing CSS and smart growth practices in project delivery.

Other important directives include "Accommodating Non-Motorized Travel" and "Project Purpose and Need." Broad guidance is also provided in the Department's cross-functional "CSS Implementation Plan," as well as the CSS strategies identified in the draft "California Transportation Plan for 2025."

In addition, "Main Streets: Flexibility in Design and Operations" identifies key CSS and smart growth design opportunities for communities to consider, and guides them toward forging transportation partnerships.

Of course, the ultimate test of the policy is how well the Department integrates these concepts into project delivery. For example, does the policy balance transportation needs and community values? Are more projects built on time and at cost? Are projects delivered in collaboration with partners? And do they include good design features?

To keep the CSS process on the right path, the Department has instituted a broad range of efforts, such as working groups, funding, training and outreach. The founding CSS Steering Committee provided the initial, overall guidance for CSS, while the Alternative Transportation and Livable Communities (ATLC) Committee has fostered dialogue with non-profit advocacy groups focusing on smart growth, healthy communities and CSS.

Several groups are focusing on non-motorized issues: the California Bicycle Advisory Committee (CBAC), the Pedestrian Safety Task Force (PSTF), and the Non-Motorized Travel Team (NMTT).





The Department also provides funds for local community transportation projects and planning through several sources: \$7 million annually from the Bicycle Transportation Account (BTA); \$20-25 million annually through Safe Routes to School (SR2S) grants; and up to \$3 million a year from each of the Community Based Transportation Planning (CBTP) and Environmental Justice (EJ) grant programs.

The Department has, or will, put into place CSS training for employees in the areas of planning, operations and design, which is intended to ensure that the Director's Policy on CSS is institutionalized into Caltrans' daily work. Nationally recognized bicycling and pedestrian experts are also working with Caltrans to develop a best practices technical report and curriculum for classroom and Web-based training.

A "Public Participation Guide" is aimed at encouraging citizen participation. In addition, a \$2.5 million Planning Public Participation Contract (PPPC) is intended to enhance outreach efforts statewide.

The Department has simultaneously weighed in on transit-oriented development (TOD), conducting extensive research to spur context sensitive

solutions for livable communities and increased ride sharing. Through "The Statewide Transit-Oriented Development Study: Factors for Success in California" (2002), the Department has promoted transit-oriented development and improved access to transit. The effort attempts to promote "24-hour places" that engage the public while increasing connections and safety for pedestrians, bicyclists and transit users.

The Future

Some have suggested that "changing the culture" of transportation policy and planning could take between six and eight years. However, Caltrans is taking an even longer-term perspective.

The California Department of Transportation is wagering that through careful cultivation and nurturing, context sensitive solutions will take root in California's deep soil, leading to both a public appreciation and practice of CSS values for decades to come.

The ultimate fruit of this effort will be realized in a lasting public works tradition and a lengthy legacy of more livable communities. ●

